

SENATE BILL REPORT

HB 2524

As of February 26, 2020

Title: An act relating to expanding the scope of agricultural products subject to requirements in chapter 15.83 RCW related to negotiation concerning production or marketing.

Brief Description: Expanding the scope of agricultural products subject to requirements in chapter 15.83 RCW related to negotiation concerning production or marketing.

Sponsors: Representatives Chandler, Blake and Dent.

Brief History: Passed House: 2/19/20, 98-0.

Committee Activity: Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks: 2/27/20.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Includes pears as an agricultural product under the Agricultural Marketing and Fair Practices Act.
- Makes it unlawful for an agricultural product handler to refuse to meet with a mutually agreed upon third-party mediator to resolve a price dispute.
- Specifies that a producer is responsible for paying any fees associated with a third-party mediation.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, WATER, NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Staff: Karen Epps (786-7424)

Background: Washington adopted the state Agricultural Marketing and Fair Practices Act (Act) in 1989. The Act addresses standards for production and marketing negotiations for agricultural products. For the purposes of the Act, "agricultural product" is defined as sweet corn and potatoes.

Negotiating Units. An association of producers may file an application with the director of the Department of Agriculture (Director) requesting accreditation as the exclusive negotiating agent for its members within a negotiating unit with respect to the sweet corn or potatoes

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produced by its members. The Director must approve an application if the Director finds that the association satisfies certain specified requirements.

Negotiations. Negotiations between agricultural product handlers (handler) and accredited associations of producers regarding the sale, compensation, or production of sweet corn or potatoes must begin at least 60 days before the normal planting date of the crop. The required negotiations must conclude within 30 days of the normal planting date. A serious, fair, and reasonable attempt to reach agreement is required. However, neither party to a negotiation must agree to a proposal, make a concession, or enter into a contract, nor is either party required to disclose proprietary business or financial records or information. Negotiation is not required by a processor that only cleans, sorts, grades, and packages these products for sale without altering the natural condition of the products. A cooperative association that contracts for crops from its own members is not required to negotiate.

Prohibited Acts. It is unlawful for an association to refuse to negotiate with a handler; coerce or intimidate a handler with respect to terminating a contract with an association or a member of the association; knowingly make certain false reports regarding an association or a handler; or engage in certain related activities. It is unlawful for a handler to:

- coerce a producer regarding the producer's right to belong to or contract with an association;
- discriminate against any producer in price or other terms because of such a membership or contract or the producer's promotion of legislation on behalf of an association of producers;
- offer inducements to a producer for refusing or ceasing to belong to an association;
- make, knowingly, certain false reports regarding an association;
- refuse to negotiate with an accredited association; or
- engage in certain other related activities.

The Director must investigate complaints regarding alleged violations of these requirements. If the Director issues a complaint charging a violation, a hearing on the charge must be conducted as a contested case under the Administrative Procedure Act. Any person injured by a violation of the Act may sue to recover damages, and reasonable attorneys' fees and costs within two years. A person who violates the Act may also be assessed a civil penalty by the Director of not more than \$5,000. The Director or an aggrieved producer or handler may seek injunctive relief regarding violations.

Summary of Bill: Pears are added to the definition of "agricultural products" under the state Agricultural Marketing and Fair Practices Act. For pears, "negotiate" means meeting at reasonable times and for reasonable periods commencing at least 60 days before the normal harvest date, and concluding within 30 days of the normal harvest date.

It is unlawful for an agricultural product handler to refuse to meet with a mutually agreed upon third-party mediator to resolve a price dispute. The producer is responsible for paying any fees associated with the third-party mediation.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.